

Third World News Agencies

by Rick Butler

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Several years ago, a great deal of attention was given to the so-called new world economic order. The attempts of the developing countries to secure higher prices on the world market for their raw materials were very closely followed in the western press, since a fundamental alteration in the world trading patterns was taking place.

Over the past year, many of these same Third World countries have been working quietly but very quickly to reshape the international news system that has been dominated for the last fifty years by the international wire services: Associated Press, United Press International, Reuters and Agence-France Presse.

In June, a conference of 58 Third World countries was held in New Delhi to discuss the establishment of a Third World news agency, to provide an alternative to the present reliance on the western agencies. At the Delhi meeting Indira Ghandi stated: "Self-reliance in sources of information is as important as technological self-reliance." There was much sharp and often bitter criticism about the handling of Third World news by the major wire services. Their coverage was described as biased, sensationalistic, unsympathetic and lacking in depth.

Many delegates to the Delhi conference also expressed a desire for their own system for exchanging news within the Third World that would be financed and controlled by the countries involved. Even today, Africa, Asia, ~~The~~ Arab states and South America, receive their daily news about each other primarily from the major western services after these foreign reports have been filtered through headquarters in New York, London, or Paris.

At the end of the conference, it was decided to proceed immediately to establish a Third World News Agency. A draft constitution, a steering committee and a budget were approved. These measures were further discussed at Third World meetings in Costa Rica in June and Colombo in August, and at the October-November biennial conference of Unesco held in Nairobi.

In the course of preparing a recent two part program for CBC Radio on Third

World news coverage, I interviewed several people who are very close to the issue, including Dr. Robert Moore, the Guyanese High Commissioner to Canada. A former journalist now resident in a foreign country, Dr. Moore is highly sensitive to the problems of cultural bias facing the foreign correspondent.

Dr. Moore: "It is very difficult for a man nurtured in England or the United States or Germany to understand Third World perceptions unless he's lived there for a long time. It would be like a Guyanese reporter, after spending six months in Ottawa, trying to sum up the Canadian scene with a kind of bogus adroitness. Then Canadian readers would say: 'but he doesn't understand Canada - he misses the subtleties and nuances!' I think western coverage of the Third World is distinctly slanted. When Guyana nationalized Alcan, I can remember collecting articles about the catastrophe that would happen when this little country nationalized a big bauxite company. Now that the bauxite industry has not collapsed, one sees very little reporting about success. If I continued to read that sort of stuff and believe it, I would have no confidence in my country ever being able to run the industry."

In addition to the problem of cultural bias, another criticism from the Third World is that the western news agencies dwell on sensationalistic stories of coups and disasters and ignore the achievements and politico-social complexities of Third World societies. CBC foreign correspondent David Halton

"Essentially, they are looking for stories that are of interest to the western reader as opposed to the reader in the country involved, so inevitably they do focus on the sensational. One example is the incredible civil war that took place in Burundi a few years ago, in which hundreds of thousands of people were killed. Because it was in an obscure country, no news got out from the agencies. Another example is the famine in Ethiopia that went on for 9 months before it was noticed and then by a British TV crew, and subsequently picked up and investigated by the news agencies."

This question of cultural bias and pandering to the appetite for sensationalism that editors rightly or wrongly ascribe to their publics is a central issue. Western reporters and editors have been raised in the traditions of scepticism, criticism, and "objectivity" that are supposedly the basis of independent journalism. The journalist is the natural adversary of the government and one of the public's main guarantees of honesty and responsiveness in government. According to this view, the reporter merely acts as an accurate mirror, reflecting the news objectively to his readers, listeners or viewers. This view, basic to western journalism, was put to me by Frank Trenaine, senior vice-president of the United Press International news agency in New York: "We're beholden to no government, no political party, no corporate entity, no individual nor group of individuals. I think slanting is in the eye of the beholder."

The Third World view involves a rejection of the notion of completely object-

ive reporting. In the words of I. Moore: "I can't share the assumption that you can have anything totally objective reporting. Even your selection of what is significant is based on your cultural assumptions."

Canadian Press (CP), which relies exclusively on American and European agencies for its Third World coverage, is distinctly leary of the Third World proposal. General Manager John Dauphinee in Toronto has expressed doubts about the credibility of the Third World Agency and the adviseability of entering into any news-sharing agreement, but indicates that CP has no plans to begin its own coverage in Africa, Asia, or Latin America.

"We can't afford to have correspondents in every country. You have to remember that CP is owned by the newspapers, and operated by management on the basis of a budget prepared by management. If we haven't expanded our number of foreign correspondents, don't blame the newspapers, blame me because I haven't recommended it and I see no point in recommending it as an economical way of running a newspaper."

The only major western wire service that is relatively unperturbed by the Third World news agency is Reuters. Founded in 1851, Reuters is owned by a consortium of British, Australian and New Zealand newspapers, with the controlling interest held in Britain. Reuters maintains 350 full-time, and 800 part-time correspondents around the world, and in the past has co-operated in the establishment of regional news agencies, such as CANA, the Caribbean News Agency. North American general manager Glenn Renfrew directs much of the blame for inadequate and sensationalistic news coverage at the editors back home: "One thing our critics do not realize is that only a very small fraction of the news that Reuters puts out is ever published or broadcast. We are not responsible for the final selection of news and the elimination of news that is not sensational."

Of course the problem of Third World news coverage ranges beyond these questions of bias and objectivity in reporting to the more tangible realms of business. There is big money in the news media, just as there is in the entertainment media. With the exception of UPI, which is a profit making corporation, most news agencies including Reuters, Associated Press and Canadian Press, are cooperatives owned by their member media outlets who find it much cheaper to pool the resources necessary for news gathering and distribution. Even though these agencies will not show a substantial profit on paper, they provide an extremely valuable service to their subscribers, the publishers and station owners.

One advantage of their size is that the major agencies are able to sell their copy to non-member countries, and in similar fashion, the sale by U.S. networks of programs to Canadian television stations. AP, for

example, serves 1,300 member newspapers and 3,100 broadcast outlets in the United States with news bureaus in 110 countries around the world. AP is often able to sell its international news services abroad, as it does to CP in Canada. This has two important effects: 1) the host countries become dependent upon AP for their view of the world and 2) AP is able to recoup part or all of the cost of gathering foreign news. It assumes the classic middleman position. Keith Fuller, the new president of AP in New York, in an unusually candid remark, explained:

"If we're not making money it would be a business mistake. Anything (financially) that we get abroad would help defray the expenses that we would be out anyway to cover the world for the United States."

Or, to use a cryptic jargon of the boardroom, "it's all gravy."

It is clear that any indigenous news coverage by the Third World and a consequent lessening of their reliance on western news services can only result in a reduction in the flow of news money from the Third to the First World. Publishers, particularly in the United States, have been quick to understand this, and vigorously attack the proposals for Third World news coverage in their house organs like EDITOR AND PUBLISHER. Terms like "free world", "spectre", and "insidious" are being removed from the Cold War freezer and thawed out to do battle with the new enemy. The UNESCO meeting in Nairobi, which discussed international information flows, came in for special attention:

"There will be enough fire power from the free world at Nairobi. Whether it will be effective against the insidious proposals being advanced is a question mark. It has to be, otherwise a Censorship Curtain around a large part of the world will rise higher than the Iron Curtain or the Bamboo Curtain."²

With doubtlessly unintended but pointed irony, this attack on the Nairobi deliberations was printed side by side with the weekly prices of newspaper stocks.

In the same edition, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER ran a feature story on the Inter-American Press Association annual convention in Williamsburg, Va., during which the IAPA Committee on Freedom of the Press came strongly against UNESCO.

"The enemies of free journalism, who at one time were only the dictators, grow and multiply. The communications media live under severe

pressures and with UNESCO in the vanguard of the enemy, it is time to get ready for a long uphill struggle."³

Clearly the editorial priorities and financial interests of the western agencies and their Third World clients differ sharply. The long standing producer-consumer relationship is breaking down as Third World informational dependence lessens. Of course, Third World countries will be exchanging one set of biases, political predispositions, and perceptual filters for another set. But in the process, the hitherto sacrosanct doctrine of the "free flow of information", which has meant in practice a flow of information from the First down to the Third World and a trickle up again, may well be giving way to a new international information order based on the "equal exchange of information".

FOOTNOTES

1. For an examination of Canada's informational dependence see Rick Butler's "News Agencies in Canada: An Analysis of Informational Dependency", MEDIA PROBE, vol. 2, no. 4, Spring 1976.
2. Robert H. Brown, UNESCO in Nairobi, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER, October 23, 1976, p.36.
3. IAPA Committee on Freedom of the Press, cited in 'UNESCO Efforts Blur Press Freedom Picture', L. William Hill, *ibid.*, p. 10.

Media Probe

The Canadian Journal of Communication
85 Thorncliffe Park Drive, #1402, Toronto M4H 1L6

Research, analysis and comment on mass media and communication. Published quarterly for Academics, media practitioners, students and the public.

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Subscription: \$3 yearly. Back issues 75¢. Contents copyrighted for the authors. The Ontario Arts Council has assisted publication with a \$500 grant.